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Behind the Scenes at a Climate Change Knowledge Sharing Network

IDS Insights from Phase One of AfricaAdapt

Catherine Fisher and Blane Harvey
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Catherine Fisher and Blane Harvey

Summary

Knowledge sharing networks are increasingly recognised as means of mobilising the knowledge and capacities needed to respond to complex and changing realities, such as the challenges posed by climate change. AfricaAdapt is one such network that describes its aim as ‘facilitating the flow of climate change adaptation knowledge for sustainable livelihoods between researchers, policy makers, civil society organisations and communities who are vulnerable to climate variability and change across the [African] continent’. This paper takes a ‘behind the scenes’ look at the AfricaAdapt Network and the partnerships on which it is based and is thus intended to be useful for others seeking to collaboratively develop knowledge sharing networks.

We focus on the dynamics of design and implementation of a knowledge sharing network in a distributed partnership, from the perspective of the former lead partner. Rather than looking at the delivery and outcomes of network activities, we explore the way in which the partners sought to develop sustainable relationships and ways of working to underpin the network, areas that are frequently under-examined, particularly among practitioners. Areas covered include: governance and management, staffing and planning, financial management, partnership dynamics, learning, capacity development, monitoring and evaluation.

Although all knowledge sharing networks are different we have tried to identify insights and principles from this specific example that can be adapted and applied in other contexts. We hope that these insights will provide a useful contribution to the broader body of theory and experience around networks and knowledge sharing.

Keywords: knowledge sharing; networks; climate change adaptation; Africa; partnership.

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Catherine Fisher works in the Impact and Learning Team at IDS. She is interested in the intersections between research, policy and practice, with a particular emphasis on the role of people trying to strengthen connections between those spheres. She has been active in convening knowledge brokers and intermediaries, supporting learning and connecting theory and practice about these roles. Her focus is on knowledge brokering and knowledge sharing, learning, capacity development and embedded evaluation. Catherine was involved in the AfricaAdapt programme as capacity development advisor and mentor, she briefly worked as part of the IDS based AfricaAdapt implementation team between 2009–2010, focusing on issues of governance and handover.

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Introduction

Knowledge sharing networks are increasingly recognised as means of supporting people to respond to complex and changing realities, such as the challenges posed by climate change. These networks, understood here as systems of actors who interact (virtually, face to face, via intermediaries, or otherwise) with the aim of sharing ideas and experiences around a shared set of challenges, can take on a wide range of forms depending upon their contexts, their membership and management, the technologies they rely upon, and many other factors. Given the wide range of contexts which they operate in, our understanding of what factors shape the success or failure of knowledge sharing networks on climate change remains incomplete and somewhat uneven. Addressing these gaps, we argue, requires deepening the body of empirical evidence and sharing lessons on knowledge networks from across this wide range of contexts. This need is particularly pertinent given the ever-growing interest on the part of institutions and actors working on climate change in establishing new networks or drawing existing ones into new forms of collaboration. In an effort to contribute to this area of work, this paper shares insights generated from the first phase of the AfricaAdapt knowledge sharing network that we hope will be of interest to those who wish to create knowledge sharing networks in collaborative ways. This paper will be of particular relevance to those creating networks that are constructed rather than emergent and those who are working in geographically distributed partnerships to construct and facilitate knowledge sharing networks.

There is already a large body of literature about networks (e.g. Amin and Hausner 1997; Perkin and Court 2005; Ramalingam, Mendizabal and Schenkenberg 2008) and a growing literature on networked knowledge sharing or knowledge management (e.g. Willard and Creech 2001; Creech and Ramji 2004; White 2010a; White 2010b). This paper seeks to add to that by taking a 'behind the scenes' look at the AfricaAdapt Network, focusing on the dynamics of design and implementation of a knowledge sharing network in a distributed partnership. It does so from the perspective of the outgoing lead partner of the network at the end of its first three year phase. It does not look at the outcomes of AfricaAdapt, nor at the specific network activities undertaken. Examples of these can be found in other literature about AfricaAdapt (AfricaAdapt 2011; Harvey, Diagne, Nnam and Tadege 2009). Instead, it focuses on the way in which the partners sought to develop the relationships, and the ways of working that underpin the network. As members of the network's management team at IDS, we have sought to identify insights from the IDS experience of the first three years of the AfricaAdapt Network that could be useful for others seeking to create knowledge sharing networks in a collaborative way. Although, as noted above, all knowledge networks are different, we have tried to identify insights and principles from this specific example that can be adapted and applied in other contexts. We hope that these insights will provide a useful contribution to the broader body of experience around networks and knowledge sharing.

AfricaAdapt is a knowledge sharing network on climate change adaptation in Africa established in 2008 and hosted by four partner organisations: Environment and Development in the Third World (ENDA-TM), based in Dakar, Senegal; the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) in Accra, Ghana; Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Climate Prediction and Applications Centre (ICPAC) in Nairobi, Kenya; and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Brighton, UK. These partners reflect the wide range of disciplines (spanning climate science, social science, and agriculture) and institutions (inter-governmental, NGO, academic and community-based organisations) active on climate change adaptation. They also closely reflect the stakeholder groups with whom the network hopes to facilitate sharing.

AfricaAdapt is an example of a named or 'big N' network (Davies 2008) in that it was initiated and funded by bilateral donors as a development intervention in response to a perceived

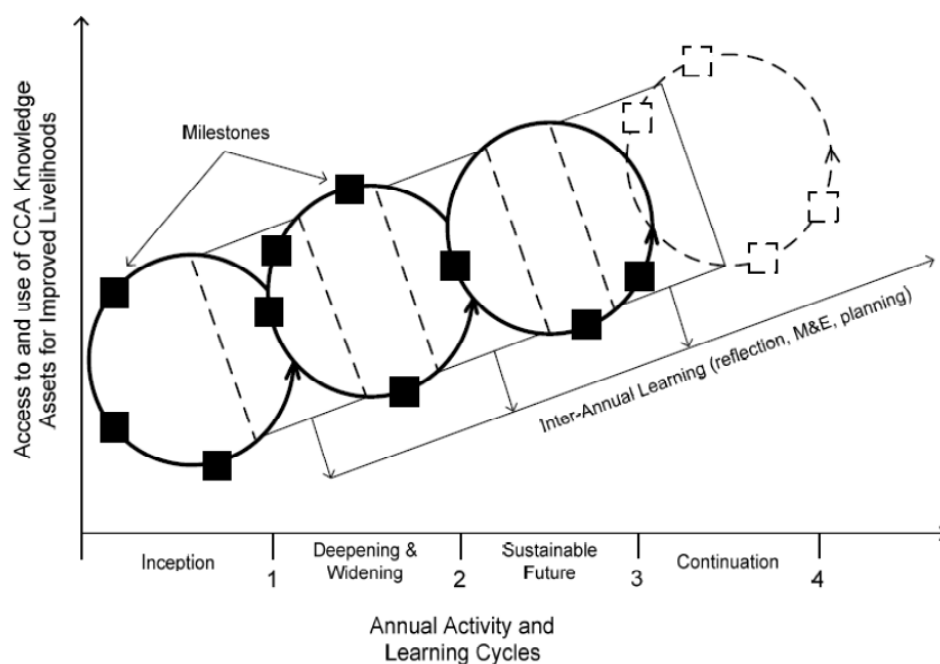
need. Thus it has at its heart a formalised agreement between the four core AfricaAdapt partners, who as members of the partnership receive dedicated funds to undertake sets of activities for which they are held accountable. This is in contrast to 'small n' or informal networks that spontaneously emerge rather than are created, do not have such formalised implementation structures, and may or may not have external funding. In AfricaAdapt's case this distinction is blurred because as a knowledge sharing network, it aims to enable the emergence of informal networks. However, this distinction is important for this paper; many of the lessons of the AfricaAdapt Network shared here are of particular relevance to named networks and may be less relevant to informal networks.

The network describes its aim as 'facilitating the flow of climate change adaptation knowledge for sustainable livelihoods between researchers, policy makers, civil society organisations and communities who are vulnerable to climate variability and change across the continent' (AfricaAdapt n.d.). Since its launch it has grown to over 1,100 members (over 80 per cent of whom are Africa-based), consisting primarily of researchers, practitioners and students working on climate change and development in Africa. AfricaAdapt is funded through the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) under a broader programme on Climate Change Adaptation in Africa (CCAA), and intends to offer a space for its members to profile the work they are doing, access information and findings from African research in a range of formats and languages, and establish new connections (both online and face-to-face) with others who are working on adaptation in Africa.

AfricaAdapt has entered its second phase, in which the network is entirely African-led and operated. The role of lead organisation for AfricaAdapt has transitioned from IDS to ENDA-TM, who lead the network in Phase Two. IDS remain involved in AfricaAdapt in a supporting role but are no longer involved in direct implementation. This paper is written from the perspective of IDS as the outgoing lead organisation and shares insights from that experience.

A key characteristic of AfricaAdapt is the strong emphasis that has been placed on learning (see Figure 1). From the outset AfricaAdapt drew on relevant theory and experiential learning in its design and establishment. In spite of its strong theoretical foundations, it has needed to evolve and respond to the realities of implementation. Ongoing learning has enabled lessons to be identified and responded to by the AfricaAdapt partnership even within the relatively short time the network has been in existence. So far, the approach of prioritising and embedding learning has enabled the network to be highly adaptive to the challenges it faces. Indeed the emphasis on learning within the design of the network has allowed or legitimised those changes. This is a great strength of the network and one that has enabled so many lessons to be identified and shared through this paper.

Figure 1: Illustration of the learning cycle approach adopted by AfricaAdapt



CCA: climate change adaptation

Source: AfricaAdapt (2007)

The AfricaAdapt Network faces two overarching challenges in the implementation and delivery of its programme and these challenges underpin many of the insights identified in this paper. They are:

- **Challenges inherent in creating an effective knowledge sharing network.** This is a relatively new kind of endeavour: one in which anticipated outcomes are difficult to predict and to measure, and the activities required to reach them are evolving, opportunistic and experimental. Creating an effective knowledge sharing network cannot be approached using a conventional project approach, it requires ways of working that may be at odds with organisations created for more concretely defined projects, and requires skills and competencies that may be unfamiliar.
- **Challenges of working in a diverse and geographically distributed partnership.** The AfricaAdapt implementation team in the first phase comprised four very different organisations in different countries working together for the first time to construct and implement an ambitious programme. The challenges of working collaboratively across different kinds of organisation (NGO, inter-governmental, social science, climate science and community-based) that AfricaAdapt was set up to bridge, were built into the infrastructure of the network. Staff working on AfricaAdapt face the widely acknowledged challenges inherent both in working in multi-stakeholder partnership and as a geographically distributed team.

This paper explores eight functional areas associated with the design, set-up and ongoing functioning of a knowledge sharing network, ranging from implementation to financial management. In each area it provides a brief introduction to how AfricaAdapt approached this area in its first phase of operation and identifies insights from that experience. These insights are summarised below.

Summary of insights

1. Implementation

- A distributed staff team is key to implementation but it needs a lot of coordination and team members need supportive environments to work in.
- Be clear what you are trying to change for whom and prioritise where you can add most value – don't be everything to everybody.
- Embrace flexibility and outcomes-based working – focus on why you are doing things not just what you are doing.
- Support members to do the (net)work, don't do it all yourself.
- Be evidence-based: use theory and experience to guide your actions.

2. Governance and management

- Inception and set-up phases are essential; they are not the same as ongoing implementation.
- Too much participation in principle can lead to unilateral decision-making in practice.
- Distinguish between governance, management and implementation and make decisions at the level most appropriate to each process.

3. Partnership

- Partners' motivations matter, possibly more than their assets.
- Sharing core tasks might not make the most of partners' relative strengths.
- Disengaged partners can grow increasingly sidelined from activities without collective action to re-engage them.
- Explore *how* activities will be undertaken not just *what* will be done.

4. Being the lead partner

- Recognise and take steps to address power inequalities.
- Lead partners may inadvertently or deliberately dominate constructions of meaning.
- Model 'good network behaviour' but expect, acknowledge and respond to criticism.
- Acknowledge multiple accountabilities: to stakeholders, partners and donors.

5. Finances and financial management

- Allow flexibility in financial planning and keep unallocated funds.
- Understand and work with each partner's financial systems; be strategic about how funds are labelled and where they are located.

6. Capacity development, learning and change

- Invest in flexible approaches to capacity building for soft and hard skills.
- Strengthening individual capacity contributes to but does not result in systemic change.
- Ongoing reflection and learning enables continuous improvement and endogenous capacity development.

7. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E)

- Provide consistent support for M&E from planning through implementation.
- M&E cannot be seen as the sole responsibility of one organisation.
- Evaluation is best seen as a learning process.

8. Transition of leadership

- Establish shared principles for handover.
- Be aware of the politics and challenges involved in choosing a new lead partner.
- Allow ample time for transition and plan for the added workload it entails.

1. Implementation

A key feature of the AfricaAdapt model is its decentralised implementation team. Unlike many other network types, the AfricaAdapt model enabled the recruitment of a dedicated staff member, known as a knowledge sharing officer (KSO), in each partner organisation. Each partner was also represented in the governance and management body known as the Core Group. The location of dedicated AfricaAdapt staff within partners has enabled AfricaAdapt partners to be genuinely involved in the network's implementation and is key to its operation. Unsurprisingly, there have been considerable challenges in working in this distributed way and the implementation system has evolved to respond to these challenges.

Initially AfricaAdapt was 'headed' by the project manager, governed by the Core Group and implemented by the KSOs. This worked for the set-up period but as the programme transitioned into implementation, a lot of day-to-day management, coordination and oversight was required that was too demanding of the time of the project manager and Core Group. A network coordinator has been recruited based at the new host organisation for the second phase to play this coordinating role and to act between management and implementation.

Working with dedicated network staff in different organisations

The expectations the network had of KSOs were high as they represented a substantial investment; however it is important to be realistic about what they can achieve and the support they need. KSOs had to manage a number of tensions including their dual identity as working both for the network and the partner organisation. They faced challenges because the kinds of activities they were expected to undertake in facilitating the network were sometimes unfamiliar to the host organisation. For example they were required to use new technologies and work in unusual ways and on different terms (e.g. convening rather than communicating). Their line managers were busy and sometimes unfamiliar with the nature of the network tasks, activities and priorities. This meant KSOs were sometimes unable to leverage the support and guidance that most new recruits require from their organisation. This may be true for many distributed or networked initiatives but seems particularly pertinent for knowledge sharing networks.

KSOs were supported through peer networking and one-to-one mentoring to help them overcome and manage uncertainties. As well as support, hands-on coordination and oversight of a distributed team is required. In Phase Two of AfricaAdapt this is being provided by a Network Coordinator. While dedicated team members in partner organisations are a huge factor in enabling this kind of network to realise its ambitions, *network stakeholders such as donors, line managers and programme managers need to acknowledge that dedicated network staff cannot deliver on programme objectives alone and they require a supportive and enabling environment in which to work.*

Prioritising activities

Knowledge sharing initiatives can sometimes become supply-driven, focusing on technologies and activities, with a poor understanding of their stakeholders and their needs. They are often subject to pressures to be everything to everybody but, as with other initiatives, it needs to be clear who their stakeholders are and the kinds of changes these initiatives are intended to bring for them. Clarity of vision helps with prioritisation and design of activities, and allows the implementation team to adapt to complex and changing situations. Strategies for maintaining this focus include using Outcome Mapping at a planning stage; carrying out user profiling and testing of any web platforms; a relationship-based marketing and engagement strategy; and close engagement with network members and their

representatives on governing structures. This can help to ensure that resources are invested wisely, and that efforts are directed as strategically as possible. *Understanding of stakeholders should determine the kinds of activities you will undertake, not the other way around. It is important to identify where you have most legitimacy and leverage, and where you can add most value, and concentrate there.*

Activity vs outcomes-based planning

In Phase One, AfricaAdapt partners learned that it was important to find a middle ground between detailed, activity-based planning and management and a more outcomes-based approach that allowed activities to emerge in response to opportunities or learning. The partners found that it was not possible or desirable to plan all activities for this kind of initiative on a yearly basis, nor that it was possible to list all of the tasks that KSOs needed to undertake on a day-to-day basis. This is perhaps one of the key differences between network convening, which is often responsive (to member needs and emerging opportunities) and more traditional types of project implementation, which may have fixed start and end points. However, for some of the network partners who came from strong traditions of project implementation using logical frameworks, Gantt charts, and similar management tools, introducing this flexibility and responsiveness into work styles and systems presented a challenge. It also proved difficult to manage in a geographically distributed network in cases where partners required support in adapting to new work styles. It may be advisable in some cases to strike a balance between working towards prescribed tasks and outputs and self-directed work aimed at achieving network outcomes.

Working with network members

A key success Phase One of AfricaAdapt was the Innovation Fund, from which small amounts of funding were made available for members and potential members of the network to document examples of adaptation practice. This served to attract people who were keen to share their experience and generated some valuable content from regions where team members were not necessarily present. It also served to establish strong and lasting relationships with grant recipients, many of whom continued to be active members beyond the duration of their funding. This principle of providing small amounts of funding for network members to undertake knowledge sharing activities is being extended in the second phase, where funding is available for knowledge exchange events to be organised by members. *The principle of catalysing and supporting action by others is an important one for knowledge sharing networks.*

Role of theory in implementation

The AfricaAdapt Network was strongly grounded in relevant theory, evidence and experience, for example, about knowledge sharing, network implementation, capacity development and M&E. However this did not always inform practice once the network was up and running. This may be because those designing the network were not always the people implementing on a day-to-day basis, and the network development and funding model meant that implementation staff were recruited only after the proposal was funded. It may also reflect the common 'know-do' gap where it is simply not possible to put into practice everything you know is advisable in theory. That said, the theoretical underpinnings have strengthened the network and it is worth ensuring that all those involved – even the 'doers' – have an awareness and understanding of relevant theory to guide their action. *Create a culture of engagement with theory and practice in the inception period, in inductions for new staff and through ongoing professional development of those involved.*

Implementation insights

- A distributed staff team is key to implementation but it needs a lot of coordination and team members need supportive environments to work in.
- Be clear what you are trying to change for whom and prioritise where you can add most value – don't be everything to everybody.
- Embrace flexibility and outcomes-based working; focus on why you are doing things not just what you are doing.
- Support members to do the (net)work, don't do it all yourself.
- Be evidence-based: use theory and experience to guide your actions.

2. Governance and management

The main governance mechanism for the AfricaAdapt Network in its first phase was the Core Group. The Core Group contained representatives from each partner organisation, and also had implementation responsibilities and line management responsibilities for KSOs. In addition to the Core Group there was an advisory board comprising senior members of each organisation and a small number of individuals from other organisations who had expertise to bring. This was set up so that each advisory board member could be called on for advice on an individual level rather than having the group operate in a more collective way. It was utilised in the set-up period but not drawn on during implementation.

A governance review was undertaken in Phase One, which sought to distinguish between governance, management and implementation. It clarified that governance is where high-level strategic decisions are made, management is the process whereby those decisions are turned into plans and activities and progress is monitored, and implementation is actually undertaking the work to achieve the goals. As a result of this review a number of changes were made in Phase One, including changing the composition of the Core Group and the overall management structure of the network, some of which are described below.

Phases of network creation and implementation

The AfricaAdapt inception period (when the core partnership was established, KSOs were recruited, and the network was launched) was important for exploring the potential for the network, and laying the foundations for the network and the partnership that would implement it. It was valuable but could have gone even further in exploring meaning around key issues and encouraging the identification of differences of opinion or positions.

The set-up period was when the infrastructure for the network was being created, such as the website, and when the core sets of network activities were initiated. At times the set-up period relied on a project management style and deadline-oriented mode of operating, which may have been useful for this stage but was not a good precedent for an ongoing programme and caused tensions within the partnership. This reflection is closely related to the points raised on outcome-based approaches to working highlighted above, which it is especially important for networks to adopt as they move into active implementation. Thus, one insight is *to be clear about what stage of development a network is in and the kinds of governance and management approaches required for each stage.*

Decision-making in partnership

Uncertainty about which decisions could be taken where and protocols for decision-making proved a stumbling block for the AfricaAdapt partners at times. The structures and processes used in the set-up period rapidly came under strain when the network moved from set-up to ongoing implementation; decision-making structures and communications approaches could not cope with the amount of communications and the number of decisions that needed consideration. The overstretched Core Group were consulted on issues ranging from strategic engagement with a new partner to reviewing the content of newsletters. At times a policy of 'lack of response means agreement' was adopted, leading to important decisions being made without discussion. So a principle of participation sometimes led to unilateral decision-making when people found it hard to identify where their participation was most important. There is a difficult balancing act between consultative decision-making, participative management, and having activities grind to a halt due to lack of consensus or extended waits for feedback from busy partners. The principle of subsidiarity, where decisions are made at the lowest possible level, is an important one for knowledge sharing networks where work needs to be opportunistic and responsive; however it may be counter-cultural for some partner organisations. *Distinguishing between governance, management and implementation and discussing early on in the partnership what kinds of decisions (about tasks, budget allocation, etc.) can be made by whom would be valuable.*

Governance and management insights

- Inception phase and set-up phases are essential; they are not the same as ongoing implementation.
- Too much participation in principle can lead to unilateral decision-making in practice.
- Distinguish between governance, management and implementation and make decisions at the level most appropriate to each process.

3. Harnessing the power of the partnership

The AfricaAdapt core partners were selected for their complementary strengths and the diverse networks of stakeholders they could mobilise. The complex nature of climate change and the challenges it poses to development mean that efforts to address its impacts draw on a wide range of capacities and knowledge bases. As such, the use of trans-disciplinary coalitions to address these challenges has become quite common. However, a remaining challenge in mobilising the strengths and diverse insights of partnerships such as AfricaAdapt is understanding how best each organisation should engage with the way in which the others work and how the network can make most effective use of the strengths of each partner.

Partners' engagement and commitment

It may sound obvious, but the extent to which each partner organisation prioritises engaging in network activities will depend on the strategic alignment between the network objectives and their own organisational objectives. In trans-disciplinary coalitions like AfricaAdapt this is likely to be a particular issue as partners may be motivated by some elements of the challenge they are addressing, and less interested in others. For example, in the AfricaAdapt

partnership, the lack of a focus on climate science proved de-motivating to some partners who felt this should be a priority.

Another factor that may affect engagement is the size of the funding compared to other funding streams and the organisation's overall funding portfolio, given that even well-funded knowledge sharing projects are generally smaller than other projects. If the network is not a strong priority for the host organisation in comparison to other initiatives, staff working on it may struggle to mobilise or even tap into the host organisation's networks, connections, etc. – the very attributes for which the host was selected as a partner. They may also be required to prioritise other activities, which limits their ability to spend time on the network. *When selecting partners it is important to assess the motivations of each partner organisation in relation to the network as well as the assets each brings, as the potential of the assets will not be realised without motivation and engagement.*

Dividing network tasks

The AfricaAdapt partnership comprised four organisations with different strengths; however in practice these strengths were not always effectively utilised for a number of reasons. Division of responsibility for AfricaAdapt tasks such as engaging network members was in part based on geographical and linguistic factors rather than harnessing the strengths within the particular stakeholder groups (agriculture, policy, science, community) of each organisation. In addition, the division of core network 'infrastructure' tasks (those tasks necessary for running the network such as donor liaison, creation of governance structures, M&E, and website construction) between core implementing partners meant that some were responsible for tasks that they were not comfortable undertaking and that did not draw on their core organisational strengths. This consumed a lot of the time that would otherwise have been available for network activities and sometimes prevented 'real' network work such as convening stakeholders. Conversely, those members of the partnership who felt that there were many areas which matched their strengths and interests tended to over-volunteer, at times taking on more than they could realistically deliver. *Sharing core network infrastructure tasks builds ownership but there is a trade-off between the time required to carry such tasks and the time that partners can commit to core network-building activities such as engaging with their stakeholder groups and using their strengths.*

Dealing with disengagement

Within a network, decisions are made in the early days and on a day-to-day basis that shape its direction and emphasis. Those who are most engaged in formal and informal processes and discussions around the network have the most influence in shaping those decisions and so can 'pull' the emphasis of the network towards their own priorities and interests by setting agendas or taking on responsibilities that interest them. For example within Phase One of AfricaAdapt there was some emphasis on community-based communication activities, which are core areas of activity and interest for some of the most engaged partners. Conversely, those who do not engage, perhaps because the network is not as close to their core interests, or because they are not familiar with the language or concepts it embodies, can see the network moving further and further away from them. This further limits their motivation and ability to engage and the ability of the network to draw on the strengths of that partner, so creating a negative cycle. The temptation is for the engaged partners to focus on their synergies and to not spend time trying to draw in a seemingly reluctant partner. *Being aware of this potential and addressing it if it begins to emerge may help this downward spiral from developing, however if it does begin to emerge, other network partners need to weigh up the merits of 'pushing' the network towards the potentially ever more disengaged partner.*

Understanding organisational contexts for implementation

During the first phase of AfricaAdapt it became clear that all of the organisations involved had very different ways of working and so would manage their contribution to AfricaAdapt differently. This played out in important ways how the KSOs were located within the organisational hierarchy, how organisations planned and implemented work, how budgets were managed, and norms about communications within and between organisations. Each organisation, particularly the lead organisation, brought assumptions about ‘how things work’ and tensions arose at various points when assumptions were not borne out. For example, IDS, which operates on a consultancy-style business model of billing days worked for its staff, outsourced certain activities to other members of the institute when workloads became overstretched. This was not always well understood by partners whose organisational models do not permit this type of ‘internal marketplace’. A particularly effective attempt to foster broader understanding was the instigation of exchanges between partners, where KSOs spent two weeks in a partner institution learning about that organisation’s areas of focus, collaborating on shared outputs, and meeting others in the partner institution. *Time spent early on in partnerships exploring not just **what** will be done (e.g. activity planning) but ideas about **how** activities will be undertaken and in what context, understanding and recognising differences between partners, would be useful to avoid unacknowledged different understandings about the nature of the work surfacing and causing problems later on.*

Partnership insights

- Partners’ motivations matter, possibly more than their assets.
- Sharing core tasks might not make the most of partners’ relative strengths.
- Disengaged partners can grow increasingly sidelined from activities without collective action to re-engage them.
- Explore *how* activities will be undertaken not just *what* will be done.

4. Being the lead partner

IDS was the lead partner for the first phase of AfricaAdapt and had been involved in developing the concept for the network alongside IDRC from the outset. Leadership and hosting meant that IDS was home to a small secretariat comprising the project manager and a Core Group member who was resourced to put more time into the network than Core Group members in other organisations, as well as a KSO with leadership responsibilities *vis-à-vis* other KSOs. IDS also mobilised staff members from outside of this main management group to provide advice and input in areas such as capacity development, communications, marketing and M&E. In its leadership role IDS bore management responsibilities which included oversight and distribution of the budget, managing the partnership to ensure delivery of the activities that the partnership had itself committed to, and reporting to donors. During the handover period these responsibilities were devolved to ENDA-TM in an extended process. In reflecting on this role, it becomes clear that being aware of power and accountability at multiple levels is a key challenge for lead partners.

Working with power inequalities

The lead organisation is in a powerful position, both explicitly through its control of budgets and relationship with donors, and implicitly through the way in which it is able to construct the terms on which the network partners operate and through the greater amount of time it has to dedicate to the network, which enables it to shape ongoing decisions. This was certainly true for IDS who at times ended up making decisions about strategic priorities (e.g. strategic partnerships) in fairly unilateral ways when other partners were not able to engage. As holder of the budget, IDS was able to move to implement those decisions in ways that other partners could not. One of the risks that this carries is having partners feel that ownership of the network lies elsewhere and is beyond their control. *The lead organisation therefore needs to take measures to address power inequalities and not consolidate them.* Useful approaches include being open about power within the partnership (tools such as power mapping exercises could help here), encouraging the development of multilateral relationships between partners through direct communication and exchanges (rather than fostering a hub-spoke model), being reflective and inviting feedback on performance from partners and stakeholders, and avoiding consolidating roles within the lead organisation.

Constructing meaning

IDS as lead partner was involved in the conceptualisation of the network, which meant that they were able to construct meaning and understandings of key terms such as 'knowledge sharing' and 'network' from the outset. Although there was a long and participatory conception period, this was not deliberately used to counterbalance this initial dominance of construction of meaning. IDS was subsequently, if often inadvertently, able to enforce this meaning directly through the creation of plans and project documentation, and indirectly through its leadership in areas such as capacity development. In the interests of creating more equitable partnerships, it is important for lead organisations to be aware of this invisible power and to take steps to make it more visible and therefore contestable. This can create a space and a network culture where difference and dissonance are valued and explored between implementing partners and with the broader membership.

Lead partner behaviours

The role that IDS played in modelling good practice in network management was valued by partners. However like many partnerships, the first phase of AfricaAdapt was a period of tension between partners, evident in particular in criticism of the lead organisation for non-consultative decision-making and insufficient communication on budgets. IDS responded by acknowledging the criticism, seeking to understand it and taking steps to address, in a consultative way, the particular issues of concern and the underlying issues around communication and decision-making. This was valued by partners and enabled the partnership to move forward. Willingness of partners to criticise can be an indicator of empowerment within a partnership; however it needs to be handled in a constructive way in order not to derail the partnership. Talking about this up-front may help to manage tensions when they emerge, as they almost inevitably will.

Balancing multiple accountabilities

A key challenge for the lead partner is balancing the need for the implementation team to deliver, to a high standard, the (many) commitments made to donors, without pushing too hard or demanding too much of partners in ways that can compromise the relationship. As the main contact point with the network funder, IDS felt under greater pressure to show that work was 'getting done'. When delays within the network emerged there were also differences of opinion around 'quality of outputs'. Issues of timeframe and quality are likely to be particularly prevalent at the beginning of the partnership, when partners may be

familiarising themselves with the range of new tasks and approaches involved in a knowledge sharing network and there is a need to be creating the building blocks needed to launch the network. Centralised project management approaches that emphasise task lists and deadlines are a tempting route but can compromise ownership of the project and are not a sustainable way of managing an ongoing knowledge sharing network. Another temptation is for the lead organisation to backstop, taking back activities which have not been completed or are not of satisfactory quality, which is also unsustainable and can affect ownership. In the early days of the network, when the membership does not itself have an established voice, the lead organisation also needs to be the champion of future members, a role which may lead it to be at odds with other partners and donors. It must also *maintain a balance between upholding a standard of quality for delivery of products and activities and recognising the need for partners (and the partnership) to gradually strengthen their capacities.*

Insights on being the lead partner

- Recognise and take steps to address power inequalities.
- Lead partners may inadvertently or deliberately dominate constructions of meaning.
- Model 'good network behaviour' but expect, acknowledge and respond to criticism.
- Acknowledge multiple accountabilities: to stakeholders, partners and donors.

5. Finances and financial management

Finances are a key issue in any partnership and tension over allocation of resources can seriously derail collaboration. In the AfricaAdapt partnership, IDS as lead partner was responsible for managing the overall budget and distributing finances to partners. Each partner had an allocation based on country costs to cover staff input, ongoing network activities (communication, travel, etc.) and specific activities on which they were leading. Although most of the budget was held by partners, IDS held the remaining unallocated budget and was able to make decisions about budget allocation as a result. Reflection on budgeting and finances led to a series of changes during Phase One and quite dramatic changes in Phase Two about how budgets are planned, allocated and communicated.

Flexibility and financial planning

In an evolving programme, financing for core or programmed activities needs to be flexible enough to allow for changes in activities undertaken towards a particular objective if circumstances or priorities change. For example, if the plan was to launch a briefing service but scoping has revealed that another product is more appropriate, the budget needs to be shifted accordingly. Having budgets allocated to different network objectives rather than activities may be one way of managing this although this may be at odds with partners' own financial management systems and/or donor protocols.

It is important for knowledge sharing networks to have 'free' or unallocated funds to enable them to respond to opportunities and to innovate. The ability to allocate small amounts of funds reasonably easily can help a network to add value to activities initiated by network members or engage with opportunities that emerge unexpectedly. To ensure transparency,

the existence and purpose of 'free' funds need to be clearly understood by partners, managed effectively and not seen as a top-up fund for core or programmed activities.

Working with different financial systems

Different institutional cultures and their finance processes will affect how network staff are able to access budgets as well as track and report on them. For example in some organisations it is normal to move money between different budget lines, while in others it is not done. AfricaAdapt experienced challenges over the 'communications' budget line. When budgets were drawn up this was intended to cover communications in its widest sense to include face-to-face, online, print, phone, etc.; however within some organisations 'communications' was defined more narrowly to cover costs such as phone calls or postage. While division of budgets between partners is very important, it may be worth having a frank discussion about where financial resources are located in order that budgets can be used most effectively for network activities. For example, if one partner's financial systems preclude flexibility or responding quickly to opportunities, then it may be better to hold finances elsewhere and to work on a system of submitting claims for network expenditure rather than having a standing budget.

Insights on finances and financial management

- Allow flexibility in financial planning and keep unallocated funds.
- Understand and work with each partner's financial systems and be strategic about how funds are labelled and where they are located.

6. Capacity development, learning and change

AfricaAdapt placed great emphasis on capacity development within the partner implementing organisations in relation to knowledge sharing.¹ The AfricaAdapt approach to capacity strengthening recognises that capacity goes beyond individual skills. Its view of capacity is one made up of five interrelated capabilities that are not just about being able to act, but being able to achieve coherence, to relate to others and to innovate (Morgan 2006, cited in AfricaAdapt Capacity Development Approach document). It recognises that capacity exists at individual, organisational, sectoral and societal levels and that these levels impact on each other.

Activities undertaken through the capacity development programme went beyond typical training packages that focus on the building individual hard skills. It also aimed to build KSOs' capacity to act effectively individually and collectively at the organisational and network levels. However, an equally important investment in the capacity of the network was the strong emphasis that has been placed on learning throughout the programme. This programme-wide emphasis on learning has engaged more stakeholders than those activities undertaken under the banner of capacity development and has arguably had more impact.

Approaches to capacity development

The experience of the AfricaAdapt Network so far has illustrated that knowledge sharing work requires unique combinations of skills, attitudes and competencies amongst those undertaking it. These range from face-to-face and online communications and facilitation

¹ For a more detailed analysis of the approach to capacity development within AfricaAdapt see Jackson (2010).

skills, writing and editing, knowledge of web-based tools, and skills and competencies for working in distributed teams. This is in addition to the subject knowledge required in an emerging and interdisciplinary field such as climate change and development. AfricaAdapt's Phase One capacity development work therefore placed a lot of emphasis on soft skills or competencies needed for the work, such as problem solving, strategic planning and time management, as well as training on technical tools.

The programme used a range of approaches including workshops focused on team building and exposure to knowledge sharing tools and strategies; an exchange programme between partner organisations; support to engage with relevant communities of practice (such as KM4Dev); and one-to-one mentoring aimed at giving KSOs a chance to reflect on their work and get help in tackling problems. This range of approaches was suitable for the particular needs and learning preferences of the individual KSOs. The capacity development support provided has been valued, although recent feedback suggests a need for more training on some of the tools and a deeper grounding in theories of knowledge sharing. *This highlights the importance of balancing both targeted and more general capacity support to ensure that those doing the work can act with confidence and with a broader understanding of why they are working in a particular way.*

Individual, organisational and systemic capacity and change

The AfricaAdapt approach to capacity development recognises that capacity cannot be developed by focusing on the skills of an individual without reference to the organisational context in which they work, and its norms and conventions. Consequently, the ambitions of the capacity development work included helping KSOs engage with their own institutions about the value and practice of knowledge sharing. Most of the changes that have taken place in AfricaAdapt partner organisations have come from the experience of being involved in the network and from having a KSO located within their organisation, rather than specifically emerging from the capacity development activities. Partners report that their involvement in the network and the example of the KSO has led to a shift in thinking and greater value placed on knowledge sharing within their organisations, which paves the way for greater change in the future. *Supporting institutional change, if it is a strategic aim, must be addressed through a more broad-based approach to capacity strengthening than those aimed at helping individuals develop and requires active buy-in from stakeholders in those organisations.*

Importance of learning and reflection

The willingness to take time out to reflect and explore issues collectively, then adapt and respond, has been a key characteristic of AfricaAdapt so far. At a network level, the most significant capacity changes may have been as a result of the emphasis it has placed on learning throughout the programme. The network has sought to mainstream learning in ongoing implementation through scheduled learning reviews at the end of each year, strategic reflection in response to emerging issues, and a culture of reflection among KSOs who regularly undertake 'After Action Reviews' of their activities. This approach has been the stimulus for important changes in the way the programme has been implemented, such as the creation of the network coordinator position, the change in composition of the Core Group, and changes to planning approaches. The KSO practice of undertaking short reviews after each activity has strengthened their day-to-day work. AfricaAdapt has been largely successful in embedding learning into action, learning by doing and adapting in response to learning. The emphasis on learning has enabled AfricaAdapt to innovate and adapt – essential characteristics of knowledge sharing networks. *The ability to develop from within rather than through external input is important and can help the network to become an intelligent consumer of external support where it is needed.*

Insights on capacity development, learning and change

- Invest in flexible approaches to capacity building for soft and hard skills.
- Strengthening individual capacity contributes to but does not result in systemic change.
- Ongoing reflection and learning enables continuous improvement and endogenous capacity development.

7. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E)

At a time when there is increased emphasis on demonstrating returns on investment in development funding it is increasingly important for publicly funded initiatives to demonstrate impact. This is a particular challenge for knowledge sharing initiatives as the changes they seek to bring about are bound up in the ways in which people know, learn and act – people who are themselves part of complex systems of change. It also presents a challenge to some organisations' preconceptions that M&E is essentially a top-down accountability mechanism rather than an opportunity for internal stock-taking and learning.

M&E for AfricaAdapt was led by one of the partners and has been a challenging area. Formal work in this area has been supplemented by ongoing reflection driven by learning and capacity development agendas. Towards the end of Phase One an external evaluation of AfricaAdapt was undertaken involving considerable stakeholder consultation. All of this constitutes a lot of M&E for a young network, in keeping with AfricaAdapt's emphasis on ongoing learning.

Supporting M&E

As an IDRC-funded project, AfricaAdapt was encouraged to use the Outcome Mapping (OM) approach to M&E which IDRC developed in the early 2000s. IDRC paid for representatives of the partner leading on M&E and the KSOs to attend a training course on OM which laid the basis for M&E for the programme. This generated a useful plan which shaped understanding of the programme, but unfortunately was never effectively implemented for a number of reasons: OM was not used by most of the partners and so was unfamiliar to those who had not attended the training; there were a huge number of indicators for which it was difficult or impossible to collect evidence; people were unaware of what evidence they needed to be collecting or did not understand why they needed to do so. OM holds huge potential for knowledge sharing networks but support is required not just in the planning stage but in implementation. In fact, this experience seems to suggest that the early stages of implementation are where support is needed the most.

Responsibility for M&E

Whatever approach is used, effective M&E of a project requires all of the implementing team to understand the purpose of the M&E and their role in it. Within AfricaAdapt, lack of shared understanding about what role the organisation leading on M&E needed to play and lack of ownership of the M&E by partners proved a real challenge in implementing an effective M&E strategy. The potential for M&E to generate meaningful learning and insights is compromised if it is seen as the sole responsibility of one organisation or if it is outsourced. *The role of the person or organisation leading on M&E is to champion M&E throughout the programme, ensure that other members of the team are clear on the purpose and value of M&E for the*

network, and to create processes for generating data and analysing it which are both understood and do-able. This can be especially challenging when it is considered amid competing priorities to be delivered.

Evaluation and learning

As lead organisation, IDS was responsible for commissioning and managing the external evaluation. When the Terms of Reference for the recent external evaluation of AfricaAdapt were designed, substantial effort was placed on generating insights that would help in the network's ongoing learning, in particular about how members view and engage with the network. The results of this external scrutiny have proved a useful marker of progress and have provided means for the AfricaAdapt partnership to validate their ideas about their progress. AfricaAdapt partners took time to engage with the recommendations and they have provided valuable input into Phase Two. *External evaluations are often perceived to be threatening and engagement with the results can be low; however if managed effectively as part of a learning process, they can be extremely useful.*

Insights on monitoring and evaluation (M&E)

- Provide consistent support for M&E from planning through implementation.
- M&E cannot be seen as the sole responsibility of one organisation.
- Evaluation is best seen as a learning process.

8. Transition of leadership

As suggested above, IDS was chosen to host the network during Phase One for the particular set of experience and strengths it could bring, and its role in modelling network behaviour and providing support and leadership has been valued. However the ambition, as was foreseen in the funder's own strategic plans for the broader CCAA programme, was always to transfer management to one of the African partners. To accommodate this transition, a six-month handover process was developed, aimed at ensuring the human resources and appropriate enabling environment were in place before the new host institution assumed all responsibilities. While this planning represented a significant investment of resources and energies (which had not been foreseen at the time of developing the network concept), it was impossible to prepare for all of the contingencies that presented themselves, and for the inevitable capacity gaps between two quite different partner institutions. One important question that may be worth considering for future networks is whether it would be more cost effective to avoid early handover by setting up with a long-term host to start with, with a supporting organisation providing intensive support as required, or to envision handover as a much lengthier (e.g. multi-year) process.

Principles for transition

The handover process was built on a set of principles informed by IDS' previous experience in handing over knowledge sharing initiatives. Principles included looking not only at what is done in the current location but at how and why, in order to adapt and improve for its new context; focusing not only on the people directly involved but all of those around them; considering broad sets of competencies needed to deliver the network and thinking creatively about how to draw on existing strengths. *Shared principles provided the framework for*

developing capacity building strategies, institutional visits and other key elements of the handover process so that all partners could appreciate the rationale of these steps.

Choosing a new lead partner

The transition started with a process for deciding which partner would take over as lead organisation. The process envisaged by partners early in the inception period, in which the new lead organisation was decided on through consensus against a set of key criteria, was not followed. IDRC, as the donor organisation, took responsibility for deciding, based on their own criteria and against proposals submitted by each partner. There are pros and cons to both approaches. While achieving consensus between partners on new leadership, where all parties are interested in assuming this role, may have presented a challenge, placing partners in direct competition with one another at an early stage of their relationship also produced tensions that needed to be managed. Ownership was compromised by the donor deciding on Phase Two but it avoided the difficult situation of partners stating their preferences for who should lead. The role of the outgoing lead partner in managing partner relations in this process was important and in this instance it was probably better if they remained neutral and outside the decision-making process.

Planning handover

The timing for the start of the handover of management of the network from IDS to one of the other partners was originally suggested for one year into the implementation of the network, the first phase of which was three years long. This was considered too soon and would have unsettled the network at a very early stage, so handover was delayed to the end of Phase One. The work required to hand over management of a network should not be underestimated, nor should the potential impact on the relationships in the Core Group and the abilities of those partners to undertake network activities during this period. These timings can be still further complicated if funding arrangements vary across the different hosting arrangements, as was the case with AfricaAdapt, as competing workplans and reporting requirements can compound workloads. *Preparing for the added burden that the handover process will add to existing work for up to six months (as was the case for AfricaAdapt) can help avoid a poor transfer of leadership or network 'down time'.*

Insights on transition of leadership

- Establish shared principles for handover.
- Be aware of the politics and challenges involved in choosing a new lead partner.
- Allow ample time for transition and plan for the added workload it entails.

Conclusions

All knowledge sharing networks are different and while there is little advice that will be true for all contexts, stakeholder groups and purposes, there may be principles and insights that can be transferred from one network experience to another. We hope that these observations from the first few years of the AfricaAdapt network will provide food for thought for others setting out to create similar initiatives. The insights shared here should be seen alongside the considerable and growing body of experience and advice about facilitating networks, and hopefully contribute to that body of work.

Key messages that we would like people thinking about creating a knowledge sharing network to take away are:

- Creating a knowledge sharing network from nothing requires substantial investment in planning and partnership building at the outset. But however much advance planning you invest, networks need to constantly adapt and evolve, so make time for learning and allow for change.
- Working in partnership can be challenging, but if you expect difficulties and make efforts to explore and overcome them, it can be transformational for all involved.
- At the end of the day the network is not about the implementing partnership but your stakeholders. Keep the sense of your purpose – what you are trying to change for whom – at the front of your mind at all times.

AfricaAdapt has moved into Phase Two as an entirely African-led and implemented network. Its mission is to enhance resilience and reduce vulnerability to the negative impacts of climate change through better facilitating of knowledge sharing, bringing disconnected stakeholders together, creating a culture of knowledge sharing and raising the profile of African knowledge and research. We hope the foundations laid in the first phase will provide a strong base for achieving its aim and that the learning shared here will be useful to others who share our commitment to supporting knowledge sharing in the context of climate change.

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